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FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5290  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0217  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0248  
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 0402  
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RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 1815

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000336

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (Added Addressee)

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/23/2016

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SUBJECT: SPAIN TEAMS WITH MAURITANIA TO STOP MIGRANT FLOW

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Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- The flow of sub-Saharan migrants from Mauritania's northern port city of Nouadhibou to the Canary Islands has developed into a crisis for the Spanish Government, which estimates that 1,500 migrants drowned this past November and December alone.

-- In reaction, the Spanish government sent four vessels to patrol Mauritania's coastline and intercept migrants before they reach the Canaries, and is currently building a "migrant repatriation camp" in Mauritania to care for returning and stranded migrants.

-- These agreements were announced following the visit of a high-level Spanish delegation March 16. However, a Spanish Embassy official confided that the visit was largely "for show" as many of the plans had been agreed upon months earlier.

-- A Spanish Embassy official described the cooperation between Spain and Mauritania as "excellent."

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(C) Comments  
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-- This crisis is directly linked to Morocco's recent decision to tighten its border between Western Sahara and Mauritania, a move it took in reaction to strong pressure from the EU to help stop migrant flows. However, the Moroccans appear to be willing partners, as this policy may also decrease income for the Polisario.

-- The tightened border has changed the migration route. Migrants, who once took boats to the Canaries from the Western Sahara, are now departing from Nouadhibou, a significantly longer sea voyage that exposes them to greater danger, ultimately resulting in the increased death rates we

have seen over the past months.

End Key Points and Comments.

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SPANISH COOPERATION WITH MAURITANIA  
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¶1. (C) The flow of sub-Saharan migrants from Mauritania's northern port city of Nouadhibou to the Canary Islands has developed into a crisis for the Spanish Government. According to the Spanish Consul Alvaro Diaz Duque, their response to the crisis has taken two paths, "first we are working with the Mauritaniens to reduce the flow of migrants leaving the country, and second, we are providing services to assist stranded and returning migrants." The first path -- called operation Seahorse -- "involves four Spanish vessels patrolling Mauritanian and international waters to stop would-be migrants before they reach the Canaries," Diaz said, adding that "the Spanish are currently manning these vessels, but we are training the Mauritaniens to eventually take over this role." According to Diaz, the boats have not yet been turned over to the Mauritaniens as has been reported in the press, but he did not rule out this eventuality.

¶2. (C) Diaz said that assistance services included "at sea rescues of threatened migrants," as well as "the creation of a repatriation camp in Nouadhibou for returning and stranded migrants." The camp, which is currently being built by 35 Spanish military engineers and is expected to open March 25, "will house and feed up to 200 migrants while they are awaiting return to their countries of origin," Diaz said. He did not provide specifics on how migrants in the camp would be returned, saying only that "that issue has not yet been resolved with the Mauritaniens." Diaz added that at present, there are approximately 200 migrants being held in Nouadhibou's main prison, and that once operational, these people will be transferred to the camp.

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¶3. (C) Diaz described the cooperation between the Spanish and Mauritaniens as "excellent." "This is really Spain's problem, and we are taking on much of the financial and technical responsibility," Diaz said, adding that "the Mauritaniens, however, have been very cooperative in lending what help they can, given their limited resources."

¶4. (C) These agreements on Spanish-Mauritanian cooperation were announced following the visit of a high-level Spanish delegation March 16. However, another Spanish Embassy official confided that the visit was largely "for show" as these plans had been underway for several months.

¶5. (C) For their part, the Mauritaniens have established a Regional Commission against Illegal Immigration. This 17-member commission, headed by the Wali (prefect) and military commander of Nouadhibou, is tasked with organizing Mauritania's reaction to the crisis, including coordinating cooperation with Spain.

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AS MANY AS 1,500 MIGRANTS DROWNED IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER  
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¶6. (U) According to a statement made by Spanish Defense Minister Jose Bono March 21, between 1,200-1,500 migrants drowned in the final two months of 2005 while attempting to cross the dangerous waters between Mauritania and the Canary Islands. More than 3,500 migrants have already arrived in the Canaries this year and an estimated 2,200 are currently awaiting repatriation.

¶7. (U) Diaz said the Spanish government's slow response to the migrant crisis has drawn sharp criticism from the Spanish public, particularly those living in the Canary Islands.

According to Diaz, this domestic criticism is what led the Spanish government to send the high-level delegation to Mauritania and press for the adding of the immigration issue to the agenda for the European Summit currently underway in Brussels.

LeBaron